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Documenting the Bonnie Cashin Collection

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Keywords: Bonnie Cashin, documentation, historical collection

The University of Cincinnati houses over 200 of the highly acclaimed and prolific fashion designer Bonnie Cashin garments. The collection has been stored in a closet for over two decades and has not been easily accessible. Our mission was to actively engage University of Cincinnati students in interdisciplinary inquiry and discovery, and to provide the global community of designers, historians, curators, students, and design-minded people, with free and open access to visual and contextual information about UC's Bonnie Cashin collection, with international research potential.

A course was created to start the research and documentation of the garments in our collection. Before the semester started, Chandra Obie, Textile Conservator from the Cincinnati Art Museum compiled a detailed documented assessing the condition of each garment including suggestions for repairs and future storage requirements. Each garment was properly numbered according to the assessment document. This provided us with a master document of the entire collection.

The students enrolled in this course were from multiple majors and many of them had no previous knowledge of Bonnie Cashin. The course started with a comprehensive analysis of one of the most significant American fashion designers, Bonnie Cashin (1907-2000) in the context of her historical, social, cultural, and intellectual environment. Throughout the semester the students we required to further research and document different aspects of Bonnie Cashin, and her designs. Once the students were familiar with her design philosophy and aesthetic, the students conducted thorough research of select garments from the UC Bonnie Cashin historical collection including silhouette, garment construction, pattern analysis, and use of hardware in the garments.

To gain more understanding of historical and cultural value of objects and collections, the principles of collecting and how to curate both physical and digital preservation, fieldtrips to Museum Center and Cincinnati Art Museum were organized. Students learned about textile conservation techniques, proper handling techniques of textiles and garments, and how to store

historical garments. Public exhibition set-up and how to market upcoming venue was introduced to students as well in preparation for the capstone project for the course.

Each student enrolled in the course selected three looks from the Bonnie Cashin collection. Every chosen garment was thoroughly analyzed. Students learned how to interpret visual and contextual information and how to prepare succinct, well-written descriptions of objects with standardized descriptive language. In order to write garment descriptions for the website, students learned additional research methodologies for supporting information for their selected garments.

Professors teaching the Photography courses in the college taught the students about correct lighting during a photo session and how to frame each shot professionally. The students took the photographs of their garments including front, back and detail views. Once the garment descriptions were finalized and all photos were ready, the students were introduced to the basics of database, digitization and standardized metadata entry that reflect current library standards. All the information was uploaded to the website.

The website includes a “Welcome” page with information about Bonnie Cashin, a brief explanation about our historical collection, the course “ Documenting a Fashion Icon: The UC Bonnie Cashin Collection, and a synopsis of the capstone project for the course – the exhibition. The “About Cashin” page is an overview of the fashion designer Bonnie Cashin, written by professor George Sarofeen. The “Our Collection” page includes photographs in all views of the garment and the descriptions. The “Course” page gives an overview of the course and portraits of our student curators from the autumn semester of 2013. The “Sources”, “Acknowledgements” and “Contact Us” pages are also included in the website.

The collaborative capstone project, the exhibition of the selected Bonnie Cashin garments and the unveiling of related digital work completed by the students, was an event as much about the collection as it was about the students who took the course, their hard work, and the knowledge they acquired throughout the course of the semester. The student curators planned, designed, marketed and executed this multidimensional exhibition event for the last week of the semester. The course was a success and the testimonies from the course evaluations were excellent. The course will be repeating until all of our Bonnie Cashin garments are documented and added to the site. <http://libraries.uc.edu/blogs/bonnie-cashin> website.